

# John Sutter and Indigenous Peoples of the Lower Sacramento Valley

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*Abstract: This essay examines two reasons why John Sutter was able to build a permanent settlement in the Sacramento Valley after others had tried and failed. The paper looks at the culture of the indigenous people and the character of John Sutter.*

The first non-indigenous person to visit the Sacramento Valley was Gabriel Moraga in 1808. Moraga was an officer in the Spanish Army and his exploratory endeavor into the interior was to seek sites for additional missions and make contact with the native people. The “contact” Moraga planned was punitive raids against Indians who escaped from the coastal missions and sought refuge among the peoples in the interior. Anyone who aided escaped Indians was to also be punished. So essentially, the Spanish were sending an army to attack and kill or capture the Indians. The Spanish were also seeking a location for a new mission and presidio to extend the Spanish influence into the interior of California. However, what the Spanish found was that their military sorties were fruitless and unsuccessful because the interior was populated by thousands of indigenous people who attacked and harassed the Spanish and any other non-natives that came into the Sacramento Valley.

The Sacramento Valley was densely populated with indigenous people because there were abundant resources and very little internal conflict. The people lived in relative harmony because everyone had plenty to eat and suitable housing in summer and winter. If a group lived north of the river they did not bother the group south of the river because everyone had access to the same resources, but that is not to say there was perfect harmony. There were minor squabbles and to understand them, we need to examine the culture of the native people. The people of the Sacramento Valley did not actually live in tribes. They lived in kinship groups of extended family. We often hear tribal names such as Miwok, Maidu, or Nisenan, but these are artificial names applied by anthropologists Alfred Kroeber, Julian Steward, Robert Heizer and others in the early twentieth century. The names were based on linguistic similarities of the languages spoken by the different groups obtained through ethnographic interviews. Before the Gold Rush, the native population lived in hundreds of villages or rancherias all over the valley. Some of the villages contained a few hundred individuals and some were as small as twenty to thirty people, but all were aligned along kinship lines. This naturally meant that something was needed to maintain genetic diversity within the groups. The “something” was the exchange of women and children among the different groups through trade and barter (see Note A). Or, occasionally, women and children were stolen, and this led to conflict. The conflict was not all out war but rather a meeting of champions. War and killing were not intrinsic to the Valley culture. Unlike other North American natives who honored bravery or death in battle, such as the Sioux and Apache, to the people of the Valley there was no concept of military

bravery, and death was simply being dead. The conflicts were affairs that involved each side squaring off with a lot of bonfires and music and dancing and screaming. The winner of the battle was decided by who put on the best show. This type of fighting is called “posturing,” and it was important in the success of John Sutter’s dealings with the natives.

To understand Sutter’s success, we need to examine a little of his character. In his memoirs, Sutter claimed to be a captain in the elite Swiss Guard of Charles X. While there is some evidence that Sutter served in the Swiss military, he was never an officer. But because he grew up during the Napoleonic Wars and was educated at a military academy, Sutter was very familiar with military language and protocol. He had a natural military bearing and spoke four languages. After Sutter purchased a Swiss captain’s uniform in St. Louis, he had no trouble identifying himself as “Captain Sutter of the Swiss Guard;” it sounded a lot better than “John Sutter, broke dry goods salesman.” This gave Sutter instant credibility and access to military, business, and political officials. You might say that Sutter was great at “posturing,” which led directly to his success in the establishment of New Helvetia.

Sutter came to the Sacramento Valley in 1839; thirty-one years after Gabriel Moraga entered the Valley, seeking to establish a mission. After Moraga, trappers came into the valley and were regularly chased off by the natives. The Spanish, Mexicans, and trappers all dealt harshly with the natives and tried to subjugate them with force, but since the natives were numerous and did not comprehend killing as a show of force, no one was able to establish a permanent settlement in the Sacramento Valley. So why was John Sutter successful?

When Sutter arrived at the confluence of the Sacramento and American Rivers he was accompanied by ten Hawaiians, two of whom were women (see Note B), and two sailors. He was greeted by a force of several hundred natives. It was the Indians intent to treat Sutter as they had all intruders before him--chase him out of the Valley. Sutter had something the previous intruders didn’t have, three cannons he had purchased from the Hudson’s Bay Company. Each of these cannon was capable of canister shot or scrap metal and Sutter had all three guns loaded. As Sutter’s small entourage landed on the south bank of the American River, the natives charged down the bank and Sutter fired his cannon. The noise was deafening, the smoke stifling, and the effect remarkable. The natives ceased their charge and stood frozen in their tracks--though no one was killed, wounded, or even scratched. Instead of firing into the charging natives, Sutter fired his cannon into the opposite bank and vaporized some cottonwoods along the edge of the river. This was powerful medicine! The natives had never seen a tree disappear before their eyes in boom and smoke. It was a show of strength, “posturing,” and posturing was just how the natives fought their own battles. Had Sutter fired into the natives he would have slaughtered several, but Sutter would have been overrun because it was several hundred Indians against Sutter’s small entourage. But whether by chance, intuition, or knowledge, Sutter had played into the culture of the native people and he fought in a manner they understood. This allowed Sutter and his party to be accepted and to become allies with the natives. The Indians became the most prominent people in the

Fort. They built the Fort; they were the army, the laborers, and eventually the “keeper of the keys.” They were Sutter’s most trusted employees. Without the help of the natives Sutter would have never successfully settled in the Sacramento Valley.

There’s also the contention that Sutter didn’t fire on the natives because he knew it would be “bad press” to kill a large number of his potential work force. But, whatever the motives, Sutter’s actions were a success. Additionally, Sutter included the Indians in the profits of his endeavors. The amount was probably not substantial, and the average working Indian probably did not have his/her life appreciably enhanced. But, Sutter did not enslave the Indians as the Spanish and Mexican mission and rancharo system had done. Instead, Sutter gave payment directly to the “Big Man (chief)” of each rancheria that supplied him with laborers and, thus, he had access to a huge labor force. Sutter actually produced at the Fort tin coins with which he paid the Indians. Those coins were then used by Indians in Sutter’s stores. Non-Indians were not allowed to spend the coins, and by doing this, Sutter prevented the non-Indians from stealing or unfairly procuring the Indian money. By twenty-first century standards, Sutter mistreated the Native Americans, but by nineteenth century standards, Sutter was a protector and benefactor of the Native People.

Sutter also earned the Native’s trust by negotiating the purchase of the land on which the Fort itself sits. Rather than proclaiming to the Natives that he, Sutter, was the owner of 48,400 acres of the Sacramento Valley based upon a grant from the Mexican government, Sutter paid for the land his Fort was going to occupy. He paid with beads, cloth, and trinkets. These meager but cherished items gave Sutter bargaining leverage to entice Native labor with the promise of additional payment for labor performed.

#### Note A

The fact that the native people were dealing in the exchange of women and children long before Sutter’s arrival in the Sacramento Valley does much to explain the notion that Sutter was brokering slaves. There is plenty of documented proof that Sutter and the other Californios freely traded native people, particularly children, and often used them as payment. There is no documentation that the natives objected. In fact, just like “posturing,” trading women and children was intrinsic to the native culture. After 1833, children were especially traded among the natives and the Californios.

In 1833, in an attempt to depopulate the Sacramento Valley to make trapping easier, the Hudson’s Bay Company planted caches of smallpox infected blankets, and imported malaria carrying mosquitoes and released them throughout the Valley. This caused an epidemic that has been estimated to have killed as much as two-thirds of the population, but never opened the Valley for easy trapping. The epidemic primarily attacked the young male population. The result was a large number of orphans and widows that were traded to villages that could provide homes. The relocation of the orphan population was still prevalent in the early 1840’s.

#### Note B

The importance of Sutter having ten Hawaiians with him cannot be overstated. This was not “Don Ho and his band.” These were 19<sup>th</sup> century Sandwich Islanders and they would have been dark haired, dark skinned, tattooed, pierced, and half naked. They would have not looked much different than the Native people of the Sacramento Valley. Because the majority of Sutter’s landing party consisted of these people, it probably gave Sutter some credibility with the local Natives.